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Leesa Cutler  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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On the Fortieth Anniversary of Hiroshima

by Leesa Cutler

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In August 1985, the world recognized the fortieth anniversary of the greatest single human-made disaster in history—the exploding of the first atom bomb in the Japanese city of Hiroshima. It is an expanding ripple of the tragedy that although those forty and under were not even born when the bombing occurred, they have lived in the ominous shadow of its implications all their lives. In his important work Hiroshima, John Hersey makes it clear that the bomb destroyed more than a city; it changed life on personal, natural, and societal levels. For any meaningful account of such a disaster, these three levels must be examined alongside the cold statistical records of numbers and area affected.

Although the bombing of Hiroshima has international implications, Hersey's Hiroshima deals primarily with the historic event on a human level. As Hersey himself said in his essay "The Novel of Contemporary History": "The task of this kind of novel is not to illuminate events; it is to illuminate the human beings who are caught up in the events".1 Hersey illuminates the human beings he has chosen to concentrate upon by following them from the hours preceding the dropping of the bomb, through the explosion, and further, as they fight to survive in the days following, and as they try to re-establish their lives.

Hiroshima concentrates on the lives, actions, and eye-witness accounts of six victims: Mrs. Nakamura, a tailor's widow with children; the Rev. Tanimoto, a Methodist minister; Dr. Fujii, a doctor with a privately-owned hospital; Dr. Sasaki, a Red Cross surgeon; Miss Sasaki, a tin worker; and Father Kleinsorge, a German Jesuit priest. Hersey interviewed many more persons than ultimately appeared in his book, and this cross-section of people has been critically examined for clues as to the choice of its composition—whether male/female, religious, or professional. According to David Sanders in his book John Hersey, Hersey "... decided to concentrate on six persons who were chosen only because they had been good interview subjects, and not for any more dramatic reasons such as their closeness to ground zero or the extent of their sufferings or because they made up any convenient cross section of Hiroshima.2

It is compelling to follow the tragedy through individuals' eyes. Readers feel as if they are reading first-hand a letter from the characters describing situations, sights, and thoughts rather than a second-hand report concentrating on statistics, isolated quotes, or governmental releases. For example, while little is learned of Miss Sasaki other than her occupation and marital engagement, it is enough to make her a real person, and aids
understanding of what the war meant to a young person. In the same way, knowing Father Kleinsorge’s position and his actions during the crisis is helpful in seeing the tragedy from another, entirely different viewpoint. The ugliness of the explosion and its effects are seen here from the perspective of an outsider. Because Hersey’s intent is to focus on the human aspect of the bombing, a great deal of the book deals with how the bomb changed and/or destroyed lives on physical, psychological, and occupational levels.

The physical hardships the victims suffered are the most immediate and obvious changes from the bombs. Dr. Fujii and Father Kleinsorge receive cuts from flying glass as the buildings they are in explode, while Miss Sasaki receives the most serious wound of the six—a broken leg—as bookcases filled with books fall upon her. The other three characters—the Rev. Tanimoto, Mrs. Nakamura, and Dr. Sasaki—are ostensibly uninjured by the initial explosion, but such is the unnatural nature of this new bomb that those who have not been injured by the blast and therefore are able to help others within moments of the upheaval, are later observed to be more likely to develop radiation sickness than those who lie quietly for days or even hours after the bombing.\(^3\)

A good example of this bomb-related irony is seen in Mrs. Nakamura, who escapes the explosion without injury. After immediately rescuing her children from the wreckage, she counts herself lucky to have survived without any of the appalling wounds she sees on others less fortunate. Yet, two weeks after the explosion, she notices that handfuls of hair are coming out in her comb. Within three or four days, she is “quite bald” (Hiroshima, p. 89). A week later, she and her youngest daughter begin feeling weak and tired. The radiation sickness itself is unpredictable: “… her son and [other] daughter who had shared every experience with her during and after the bombing, felt fine” (Hiroshima, p. 90).

Unfortunately, such is the fickle nature of the radiation sickness that even those who are initially injured and forced to remain quiet immediately after the blast, are still not always immune to the sickness. Father Kleinsorge’s “apparently negligible but unhealed cuts . . . had suddenly opened wider and were swollen and inflamed” (Hiroshima, p. 89). The bomb thus causes deterioration of the natural healing systems of the body, evidenced in the inexplicable weakness felt by many survivors. Six months and more after, the strange sickness continues to disrupt health and drain vitalities. Dr. Sasaki, who still felt “tired all the time,” summed it up when he remarked, “But I have to realize . . . that the whole community is tired” (Hiroshima, p. 113).

Physical sufferings caused by war are always tragic, but when doctors are unable to heal the wounded because of the horrible novelty of the weapons used, war takes on a dreadful new meaning. The balance of nature found in normal physical recovery may suddenly be upset forever,
making a return to normal lifestyles impossible. Such is the case for some of Hiroshima’s victims.

Besides physical destruction, people suffered psychologically as they were forced to deal with experiences and situations so horrible that new codes of behavior were required. An example of this mental unbalance is seen in Mrs. Nakamura’s actions after the bombing. After freeing her children, she takes them out into the street and, “although the day was very hot, she worried rather confusedly about their being cold” (Hiroshima, p. 27). It is also Mrs. Nakamura who dumps her most precious possession, a metal sewing machine, into a cement tank of water. The tank, because it was a safety measure against possible conventional fire raids, remains for her a symbol of safety despite the completely different nature of the atomic attack. Her sewing machine, of course, rusts beyond repair in this liquid safe deposit box.

Others are also psychologically affected. Dr. Sasaki, uninjured by the blast, immediately begins attending to the injured. As at least ten thousand wounded begin arriving at the hospital (which has only six hundred beds, all occupied), Dr. Sasaki is thrown into confusion by the numbers and by the amount of so much raw flesh. He, Hersey says, “lost all sense of profession and stopped working as a skillful surgeon and sympathetic man; he became an automaton, mechanically wiping, daubing, wiping, daubing” (Hiroshima, p. 35).

For some, the staggering destruction causes unreasonable madness. Mr. Fukai, the secretary of Father Kleinsorge’s diocese, is discovered amid the rubble, weeping. As Father Kleinsorge and a theological student attempt to carry him to safety, he whimpers to be allowed to remain: “Leave me here to die” (Hiroshima, p. 38). Escaping moments later, he runs back toward the fire and is never seen again.

For others, shreds of humanity remain despite the barbarism of the scene. Yet these people are also stunned by what they see, and often act irrationally. The Rev. Tanimoto, for example, awed by the horribly burned and maimed people he encounters, begs of many of them, “Excuse me for having no burden like yours,” for he is unscathed by the blast. Later, miraculously encountering his wife and child, he does not greet them, but remarks, “Oh, you are safe,” and they part “casually” and bewilderedly (Hiroshima, p. 41).

Perhaps the saddest example of all is the young wife, Mrs. Kamai, who keeps her dead baby in her arms for four days and refuses to give it up for cremation until her husband can be located. Under conventional war conditions, she may have accepted the baby’s death as a tragedy of war, but in encountering the unexplicable and unbearable horrors of the atomic destruction, she is unable to yield up her baby for, even in death, it is a link with the understandable. The poignancy of this mother/child account is more touching than any statistics, and is well used by Hersey
to reduce the inconceivable destruction and loss to human dimension.

A final level of personal destruction is seen in the distressed fabric of people's lifestyles. Although recovery and rebuilding of Hiroshima have begun by the end of the volume, aspects of some personal lives are never fully restored. To the people involved, Hiroshima is more than a demolished city; it is the destroyed lives and professions of many. Dr. Fujii escapes the initial blast with lacerations and fractures; unfortunately, his private hospital is not as lucky. Hersey writes: "A year after the bomb dropped . . . Dr. Fujii had lost the thirty-room hospital it took him many years to acquire and had no prospects of rebuilding" (Hiroshima, p. 114). The widow, Mrs. Nakamura, is destitute a year after the bombing; Miss Sasaki is a cripple who wonders whether her bomb-related injuries have alienated her fiance; and the Rev. Tanimoto's church has been ruined and he no longer has his old vitality.

A force as frighteningly unimaginable as the atomic bomb changes more than individual human lives, however; it changes the very patterns of human life. These broken patterns appear as shards of irony in Hiroshima. On the day of the bombing, for example, people are totally unprepared for the attack for the routine "all clear" bombing raid signals have already been sounded, attended to, and dismissed. Then the bomb is detonated. Following this ironic attack which catches them off guard, the wounded stream to hospitals—buildings which traditionally have been ethically off-limits to enemy bombing in time of war—only to discover that most hospitals no longer exist; they, too, and the old ethics, have been casualties of the bomb.

Some of the ironies cut deeper than others. The Rev. Tanimoto, who spends tiring hours ferrying many of the injured to the higher "safety" of the riverbank, awakes the next day to find the same injured now drowned and floating in the river, pulled gently to their deaths by a rising tide. Perhaps the most ironic incidents are those connected with the fire that sweeps the rubble. The first fire-related irony involves the man who lived next door to Mrs. Nakamura. Moments before the blast that kills him and levels his home, he had been tearing apart his home, board by board, to sacrifice his home for the completion of a wide fire lane, "which, it was hoped, might act in conjunction with the rivers to localize any fires started by an incendiary raid" (Hiroshima, p. 11). As noted earlier, another fire-related irony occurs when Mrs. Nakamura, muddled by fear, dumps her metal sewing machine into a cement water tank reserved for fires.

While people are coping with the immediate needs of survival, nature is also dazed by the bomb which produces changes in the environment never before experienced. After the bombing, the laws of nature are rewritten in Hiroshima. Immediately following the explosion, people begin heading for Asano Park, a private estate far enough away from the detonation so that the trees are still alive and their foliage still intact and green.
Some came "because of an irresistible, atavistic urge to hide under the leaves" (Hiroshima, p. 47), for they believe there is safety in the natural environment.

However, in spite of its "Garden of Eden" attraction and its hint of security in the Japanese-style landscaping, Asano Park is no longer recreational; it has become a deadly zone for many. Drinking from the river nearby causes nausea and retching. The air nauseates because it contains an "electric" smell, probably from the ionization given off by the bomb's fission (Hiroshima, p. 47). Ultimately, the cool greenness which promises life and sanctuary becomes an open mass grave as people begin to die.

The bomb also affects the weather in new ways. Abnormally large raindrops fall, only to become swept into a whirlwind that tears through the park. Trees and people are uprooted by the wind and tossed about. At least one person, Mrs. Murata, is blown down an embankment onto a rocky place where she is injured and bloodied. All these abnormal conditions of nature serve to illustrate that a piece of land untouched and secure no longer exists in the bombed city—despite appearances.

As the laws of nature are changed, plants and wildlife suffer as well as people. Pumpkins are flash-cooked on the vine, and fish are inexplicably killed. Strangely, weeds which are initially burned off the ground, later spring back in even greater abundance. In fact in this area, nature goes on a reproductive spree—unlike the human reproductive systems which become temporarily sterile. Weeds soon blanket everything, including charred trunks and rubble. Hersey notes that, "Weeds already hid the ashes, and wild flowers were in bloom among the city's bones" (Hiroshima, p. 91). The new vegetation seems to be more lush than the pre-bomb variety, actually growing through cracks in bricks and asphalt. It is so extraordinarily verdant that Hersey comments: "It actually seemed as if a load of sicle senna seed had been dropped along with the bomb" (Hiroshima, p. 92).

The weedy rampage seems to echo eerily God's curse on Man in the Garden of Eden for the sin of tasting of the Tree of Knowledge. In Genesis 3:17 God warns; "... cursed is the ground because of you..." Just as the first man's desire to control everything around him through knowledge proved fatal in Biblical teachings, so man's desire to use his knowledge to control the force of nature in the 1940s proves fatal.

Besides these changes in nature, other unnatural results linger in the rubble of the bombed city. For example, marble gravestones are shifted or fused with other stone; the light of the bomb has left shadow prints of objects—"including a few vague human silhouettes—on some surviving walls and roofs" (Hiroshima, p. 96). These oddities are the result of unnaturally high radioactivity (4.2 times the average for the earth in that area) or heat (Hiroshima, p. 95). Scientists concluded that the bomb's heat on the ground at the center must have been 6,000°C (Hiroshima,
With such unnaturally intense conditions bombarding the environment, unnaturally strong protective devices would have been necessary. Scientists estimated it would have required a “shelter of concrete 50 inches thick to protect a human being entirely from radiation sickness” (Hiroshima, p. 108). Unfortunately, none were available for the victims of Hiroshima.

Ironically, although the changes made in personal and natural patterns are readily apparent, it is at the societal level that changes are less visible, almost imperceptible, yet equally portentous. The Japanese are traditionally depicted as a serene people who show the same great respect to their neighbors as to their politicians. In the sudden and disrupting destruction that the bomb brings, it might be expected that the traditional Japanese attitude and behavior would reflect a similar breakdown. But the cultural traditions and even stereotypes of politeness and reserve continue, despite intense personal pain and loss. While the bomb destroyed many aspects of Japanese life, the day-to-day cultural traditions of behavior seem to remain unshaken; the changes that occur are not readily apparent.

Yet despite appearances, the bomb was powerful enough to change Hiroshima at the larger societal level. Because society affects individuals in their perceptions, not only of personal relationships but also of community and nation, in many ways it is at this level of change that Hiroshima sustained the greatest irreparable damage as the context of the political-social structure changed.

The years immediately preceding World War II were troubled years in Japan. Political changes were rumbling from within the Japan of traditional values. In an increasingly Westernized world, the people of Japan were relatively unsophisticated in democratic terms, for the Emperor had total authority over his people, both politically and socially. In an age of mass communication, he rarely presented himself to his people, in this way more easily encouraging the almost religious reverence in which he was held.

As dangerous as such a combined political-religious figure may seem to Westerners, the social and national patriotism and sense of duty which the Emperor inspired were praised by many of the bomb’s victims as the driving forces which sustained them in their times of crisis. The Rev. Tanimoto tells of a father and son who were buried by the bomb under two stories of rubble. The son said, “Father, we can do nothing except make our mind up to consecrate our lives for the country. Let us give ‘Banzai’ to our Emperor.” This dedication, according to the father, resulted in a “calm and bright and peaceful spirit in my heart, when I chanted ‘Banzai’ to Tenno.” The man continued, “What a fortunate [sic] that we are Japanese! It was my first time I ever tasted such a beautiful spirit when I decided to die for our Emperor” (Hiroshima, pp. 115-116). The Rev. Tanimoto sums up the reverential attitude of the people towards their
Emperor and country: “Yes, people of Hiroshima died mainly in the atomic bombing, believing that it was for the Emperor’s sake” (*Hiroshima*, p. 116).

While such an attitude seems beneficial for the Japanese, some Westerners may question social values which encourage people to die so quietly and uncomplainingly for a political leader. The Rev. Tanimoto proudly writes in a letter, “. . . the marvelous thing in our history happened. Our Emperor broadcasted his own voice through radio to us, common people of Japan” (*Hiroshima*, p. 85). Others call the broadcast a “wonderful blessing” and a “great sacrifice” (*Hiroshima*, p. 85). Westerners, however, might instead have shuddered at the shallowness of the gesture, and have demanded more answers more quickly. Instead, the Japanese “died in silence, with no grudge, setting their teeth to bear it” (*Hiroshima*, p. 115).

Ironically, this same quiet devotion to duty that may have helped some Japanese to survive, also helps the Americans enter the rubble city and continue to break down values that the bomb has begun to shake. The Americans bring their Western values of independence and equality into the Japanese world of “traditions” and “duty.” The change begins in people like Dr. Fujii who, being “prosperous and hedonistic” (*Hiroshima*, p. 13), buys another private clinic to replace the one the bomb destroys, and hangs out a sign in English “in honor of the conquerors . . . on whom he lavished whiskey and practiced English” (*Hiroshima*, 103).

While the bomb changed many aspects of Hiroshima and Japanese society, perhaps its greatest impact is felt in the form of a universal loss of innocence. This loss affected more than the mere collective innocence of the people of Japan and the rest of the world. Overnight the thoughts and responsibilities of everyone were shifted into a terrible new sophistication. People everywhere and forever are now saddled with the burden of their own potential annihilation. Death, always inevitable, takes on horrifying new possibilities.

In Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, one of the ways the loss of innocence makes itself manifest is in a loss of trust in everything from politics to nature. Politically, the average person begins to feel impotent as he/she realizes that his/her voice and vote are relatively powerless in the shadow of a weapon which can produce Armageddon within minutes. What hope does a common citizen have if the bomb brings an Emperor to his knees? How can citizens trust their political leaders or political system for protection when the world sees for itself that the bomb has neither master nor discretion?

While politicians still pretend they are able to control the bomb, Nature is not as smug. People have witnessed how Nature can be manipulated by the bomb into an ominous new force. Nature’s balance can be upset or totally destroyed, scientists warn, resulting in mutations and weather
instabilities. The message introduced by the atomic age, as evidenced in Hersey's account of Hiroshima, is that one can not trust politicians before a bombing, or nature after.

In such a void, many turn to philosophy to help them understand the new consciousness that exploded with the bomb at Hiroshima. In 1945, questions were immediately raised: Should we ever have used such a weapon? Should we control or even ban its use in future confrontations? A German Jesuit priest, Father Siemes, who was at Nagatsuka at the time of the attack, wrote the following in a report to the Holy See in Rome:

Some of us consider the bomb in the same category as poison gas and were against its use on a civilian population. Others were of the opinion that in total war, as carried on in Japan, there was no difference between civilians and soldiers, and that the bomb itself was an effective force tending to end the bloodshed, warning Japan to surrender and thus to avoid total destruction. It seems logical that he who supports total war in principle cannot complain of a war against civilians. The crux of the matter is whether total war in its present form is justifiable, even when it serves a just purpose. Does it not have material and spiritual evil as its consequences which far exceed whatever good might result? When will our moralists give us a clear answer to this question? (Hiroshima, p. 117-118).

The question asked of the moralists forty years ago in Hersey's Hiroshima remains unanswered today. Opinions differ, with some viewing the bomb as a deterrent to war because of its weight in the balance of powers, while others favor dismantling the bomb, arguing that humans have never created a weapon they did not ultimately use.

In choosing to write about the bombing of Hiroshima, Hersey's "objectivity" is guided by his belief that: "The best novels can never be employees of politics; yet there is one politics from which every novel can and must take orders; the politics of universality, of humanity" ("A Novel of Contemporary History," p. 84). Hersey wants Americans and the rest of the world to understand exactly what happened at Hiroshima, because as guardians of humanity, we have responsibilities to the generations who will follow.

Notes

1 John Hersey, "The Novel of Contemporary History," The Atlantic Monthly, November 1949, p. 82.